

Israel's COVID-19 Diplomacy in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Europe

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ABSTRACT *Israel's aid initiatives have historically been facilitated through the Agency for International Development Cooperation (MASHAV). However, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted MASHAV's ability to provide assistance due to budget cuts and government instability. As such, Israel's COVID-19 diplomacy initiative took on greater importance in maintaining its presence and reputation internationally. This article analyzes Israel's approach to COVID-19 diplomacy, which involved providing medical teams, PPE, and surplus vaccines to approximately 20 countries, and examines the political and strategic calculations behind Israel's decision to extend assistance to specific countries. The article argues that Israel's COVID-19 diplomacy initiative was more limited in scope and geography compared to other countries with similar economic development levels, and aid efforts were concentrated in regions where Israel has sought to increase its involvement in recent years, particularly sub-Saharan Africa and Central Europe. Finally, the article assesses the impact of Israel's COVID-19 diplomacy initiative on its diplomatic relations with recipient countries and the broader international community.*

Keywords: Israel, COVID-19, Central Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction

Israel's aid diplomacy efforts extend back to the early 1950s, when the newly established state, striving to diversify its diplomatic relations and gain support in intergovernmental organizations, launched various aid initiatives. In terms of humanitarian and development aid, the most important initiative of the Israeli government was the establishment of the Agency for International Development Cooperation (MASHAV) in 1958. Since then, alongside providing humanitarian assistance to over 140 nations, MASHAV has engaged in hundreds of joint development projects and directly trained more than 300,000 individuals in areas in which Israel has accumulated experience, particularly in public health, education, and agriculture.¹ Combined with bilateral trade and weapons sales, these development and humanitarian assistance efforts facilitated the establishment of sound bilateral relations with many nations. Therefore, MASHAV has been one of the backbones of Israeli diplomacy, particularly vis-a-vis the developing world. However, in recent years, the near paralyzation of government ministries due to consecutive elections and the slashing of overseas aid budgets amid financial hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly reduced Israeli development assistance through MASHAV. According to Gil Haskel, director of the agency for the last eight years, the lack of budget for MASHAV's consultancies and training courses constitutes a "strategic hit to Israel's presence and international reputation."² Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be an opportunity for Israel to achieve diplomatic gains. From the early stages of the pandemic, the Israeli leadership has embarked on the so-called "COVID-19 diplomacy." COVID-19 diplomacy is a novel term that began to appear in media outlets circa mid-2020. Lacking an exact definition in the scientific discourse, "COVID-19 diplomacy" was initially used to refer to China's extensive personal protective equipment (PPE) donations and deployment of Chinese medical teams³ to countries that faced increasing infection rates amid severe equipment and manpower shortages,⁴ to shore up China's international image and strengthen its bilateral relations.⁵ The term later gained substantial popularity in academia as well as global media, as other high and medium-level income countries, particularly, inter-alia, Russia, Türkiye, and India, began to undertake similar aid initiatives. By the end of the first year of the pandemic, vaccines have emerged as the linchpin of the global struggle against COVID-19. In this context, overtaking the donations of PPE, test kits, and ventilators, vaccines have become the most important element of COVID-19 diplomacy initiatives. Many vaccine-producing countries, especially China⁶ and Russia,⁷ have pledged to donate large quantities of vaccines, mainly to middle and low-income countries, and have signed agreements for local vaccine production. In addition, some non-producer countries have also donated their surplus stock of acquired vaccines to countries that experience difficulties in acquiring enough doses to immunize their frontline medical workers or general populations.

This article will analyze the COVID-19 diplomacy initiative undertaken by Israel to strengthen its existing partnerships and forge new ones. While many other countries with similar economic development levels have undertaken large-scale COVID-19-related aid programs to shore up their global image and influence, Israel's COVID-19 diplomacy initiative has been more limited in terms of both scope and geography. Since April 2020, the Israeli government has deployed Israeli medical teams, donated PPE, and shipped surplus vaccines to approximately 20 countries, the overwhelming majority of which have long-standing strategic cooperation with Israel.⁸ These recipient countries included Kazakhstan, Panama, Ethiopia, Nepal, Mexico, Chile, Kenya, Nepal, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Uzbekistan, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Cameroon, Guatemala, Rwanda, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Italy, and Honduras. This analysis focuses on Israel's COVID-19 diplomacy efforts in sub-Saharan Africa and Central Europe, the two regions that have witnessed substantially increased Israeli involvement in recent years, as explained in more detail below. The goal is to outline political and strategic calculations behind the Israeli government's decision to extend COVID-19-related assistance to certain countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Central Europe and assess the impact of Israel's COVID-19 diplomacy initiative.



MASHAV has been one of the backbones of Israeli diplomacy, particularly vis-a-vis the developing world

The research method employed in this study is qualitative, and the authors used both primary and secondary sources, including, inter-alia, documents from governmental websites, United Nations (UN) vote records, articles published in peer review journals and newspaper reports, to review Israeli foreign policy toward sub-Saharan Africa and Central Europe, and outline what activities Israel's COVID-19 diplomacy efforts comprised. The UN data used for this article are recorded in the UN Digital Library and UN Watch databases. The UN Digital Library data covers all UN General Assembly (UNGA) and UN Security Council (UNSC) sessions from 1946 onward, and the dataset created by UN Watch allows cross-comparison of voting patterns of different countries on resolutions concerning Israel since 2015. Where available, the authors also analyzed statements of Israeli officials concerning COVID-19 related assistance to explore the key themes of Israeli rhetoric and lay out how they justified assisting certain countries.

Israeli Foreign Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa

In 2017, during his address at the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Heads of State and Government Summit in Liberia, Benjamin Netanyahu, then-Prime Minister of Israel, stated that Africa is among



Visiting
Liberia's capital,
Monrovia, Israeli
PM Netanyahu
attended the
Economic
Community of
West African
States (ECOWAS)
summit.
ISRAEL PRIME
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Israel's top national and international priorities. Indeed, over the last decade, the Israeli leadership has relentlessly worked toward restoring diplomatic relations that were severed during the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and developing extensive economic, security, and political ties with the continent, to extend its sphere of influence. Israel's strategy predominantly focuses on deepening ties with sub-Saharan nations. With a constantly growing population exceeding 1.1 billion, sub-Saharan Africa is home to some of the fastest-growing economies in the world. It offers an important potential market for Israel's exports in multiple areas, such as agricultural technology, irrigation, solar energy, and military goods. Israeli policymakers aim to establish strong commercial ties with sub-Saharan Africa to diversify Israel's export markets, thus reducing over-dependence on certain markets in Europe and North America.

Although economic issues also play a significant role, the Israeli policymakers' main goal is to win the region to Israel's side in intergovernmental organizations to alter the unfavorable balance of votes; sub-Saharan African countries have almost one-quarter of the seats at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). In 2017, during a meeting with Israel's ambassadors to African nations, Netanyahu declared that Israel's first interest in Africa is "to dramatically change the situation regarding African votes at the UN and other international bodies from opposition to support." Moreover, Israel's foreign policy toward sub-Saharan Africa places great emphasis on security cooperation, as the stability of the region, particularly of the Horn of Africa, is vital for Israel's na-

tional security. The spread of al-Qaeda and al-Shabab in the region poses a direct threat to Israel's maritime security, assets, and investments. For instance, the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, which was attacked by al-Shabab militants in 2013, is reportedly owned by Israelis.¹⁰ Furthermore, Israel faces domestic pressure from sub-Saharan illegal immigration. So much so that, by 2012, illegal immigrants and asylum-seekers from the region represented nearly 1 percent of Israel's population. Although measures taken by the Israeli government, including constructing a fence along the border with Egypt and providing financial assistance for voluntary departures to third countries, led to a substantial decrease in the number of illegal immigrants, a significant number of people from sub-Saharan Africa still try to cross into Israel to seek asylum.

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Israel's COVID-19 Diplomacy in Sub-Saharan Africa

Donation of PPE

The COVID-19 pandemic caught the world off guard, as most countries initially experienced severe shortages of PPE for frontline medical workers. The steep rise in demand for PPE quickly overwhelmed the global medical equipment industry, which triggered price gouging and export bans. Despite the initial shock, the medical equipment industry quickly adapted to the increased demand, and, within a few months, the shortage of PPE largely ceased to exist in high and middle-income countries. Nevertheless, many low-income countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, still experience severe shortages of PPE. In a continuation of its recent thrust into the region, Israel donated PPE to several sub-Saharan African countries.

In April 2020, Cameroon became the first African state to receive Israel's COVID-19-related humanitarian assistance, as the Embassy of Israel in Yaounde donated hundreds of 3D-printed face shields to the Cameroonian government. The shields were produced by the 3D High-Tech Centre at the National Advanced School of Engineering (Polytechnique) in Yaounde, which was established with the assistance of an Israeli company and uses Israeli technology and equipment.¹¹ During the donation ceremony, the Ambassador of Israel to Cameroon, Isi Yanouka, stated that the face shields, initially intended for Cameroonian healthcare personnel, could later be exported to other African countries.¹² Cameroon is one of the West African countries that have close, long-standing ties with Israel, extending back to the mid-1980s. Since the coup

Given its strategic importance for Israel's national security, Ethiopia has been one of the major recipients of Israel's development aid and military assistance programs in sub-Saharan Africa

d'état attempt against President Paul Biya in 1984, Cameroon and Israel have developed strong military ties, to the extent that Cameroon's Presidential Guards and elite units of the Cameroonian army, also known as the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), have been trained and equipped by Israeli security companies.¹³ In addition to fighting Boko Haram in Northern Cameroon, the BIR reportedly played

a decisive role in quelling widespread protests against Biya's rule in 2017.¹⁴ In exchange for bolstering Biya's security apparatus, Israel garners the support of Cameroon at the UN. For instance, in 2017, Cameroon was one of the eight African countries that abstained from the UN General Assembly (UNGA) vote on Resolution ES-10/L.22, which declared the status of Jerusalem as Israel's capital as "null and void."¹⁵ Similarly, in March 2021, Cameroon was one of the six countries that voted against the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Resolution 46/L.31 on "Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territory," which heavily criticized Israel's practices.¹⁶ Furthermore, alongside Eritrea, Cameroon is one of the two African countries that do not officially recognize Palestine.

In July 2020, the Embassy of Israel in Nairobi provided PPE to frontline medical workers at Kenyatta National Hospital, which has had an ongoing collaboration with MASHAV for years.¹⁷ MASHAV's press release called PPE delivery to Kenyatta National Hospital an event that reflected "the spirit of solidarity existing between the two countries."¹⁸ Strategically located on the fringes of the Horn of Africa, and containing vital shipping lanes connecting Israel to East Africa, Asia and Oceania, Kenya has been regarded by Israeli policymakers as a base through which Israel's maritime security in East Africa can be assured.¹⁹ Given its strategic importance, the Israeli government has traditionally pursued strong diplomatic, economic, and military relations with Kenya. Initially established under the ambit of MASHAV, Israeli-Kenyan relations quickly evolved into multifaceted cooperation. Even when diplomatic ties were severed in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, the two countries maintained close cooperation. For instance, during the Entebbe Operation in 1976, the Israeli Air Force was granted permission to land and refuel at a Kenyan airport, vital for the operation's success.²⁰ Since the 1998 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, military relations between Israel and Kenya gradually developed into a strategic partnership. Alongside selling hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of military equipment to the Kenyan army, including machine guns, artillery, communications devices, and ammunition, Israeli experts have provided counter-insurgency training to hundreds of Kenyan sol-

diers.²¹ Furthermore, Kenya became an important base for Israeli intelligence services to counter the activities of extremist groups in the Horn of Africa, which are deemed to be a threat to both Israeli and Kenyan national security. For instance, in 2013, Israeli *Sayeret* forces reportedly assisted in a Kenyan military operation against al-Shabab insurgents who stormed Nairobi's Westgate shopping center and killed 67 civilians.²² Moreover, Kenya plays a vital role in Israeli policymakers' plans of strengthening trade with African countries to reduce Israel's over-reliance on the North American and European markets for its exports. With annual exports exceeding \$55 million, Kenya is among Israel's top five trading partners in Africa, and Israeli companies have lucrative investments in the country in several sectors, ranging from agriculture to waste management.²³

In August 2020, in addition to food and cleaning product assistance, MASHAV provided hundreds of medical gowns and 8,000 N-95 face masks to Liberia.²⁴ The cooperation between Israel and Liberia dates back to the pre-state era, as Liberia was among the 33 countries that voted in favor of the 1947 UN Partition Resolution (UNGA 181) and the first African country to recognize the State of Israel. Since then, the two countries have generally enjoyed cordial relations. For instance, the suspension of diplomatic relations in 1973 due to the heavy pressure applied by the Arab League, notwithstanding, Liberia was one of the four African states that voted against UNGA Resolution 3379 of 1975, which equated Zionism with racism. Although more than four decades have passed since that vote, Liberia maintains its strong voting record on Israel in the UNGA. In 2018, Liberia was one of the five African countries that abstained from voting on UNGA Resolution ES-10/L.23 criticized Israel's response to the 2018 Gaza border protests, and one of the six African countries that voted in favor of the UNGA draft Resolution 73/L.42, which condemned "the egregious and ongoing violent acts of Hamas and other militant groups in Gaza." Amid Netanyahu's push to strengthen ties with Africa, Israel-Liberia relations have become more dynamic and broader in recent years. In June 2017, Netanyahu visited Monrovia to attend the ECOWAS summit, and, in February 2019, Liberia's newly elected president, George Weah, embarked on a four-day visit to Israel to meet with Benjamin Netanyahu and Reuven Rivlin. According to Israeli media outlets, Weah seeks to develop cooperation with Israel in numerous fields, ranging from agriculture to security.²⁵

In September 2020, Ethiopia became the second East African beneficiary of Israel's COVID-19-related aid, when the Embassy of Israel in Addis Ababa and MASHAV donated face shields to three Ethiopian non-governmental organizations. MASHAV's press release stated that this act of solidarity was "another symbol for the continuous support of Israel in Ethiopia's efforts to fight the pandemic."²⁶ Ethiopia is among the main allies of Israel in sub-Saharan Africa. Since the 1950s, Israeli policymakers have worked toward maintaining

close relations with Ethiopia, mainly to counter a possible attempt by hostile nations to block Israel's access to the Red Sea and the strategically important Bab al-Mandab Strait. Given its strategic importance for Israel's national security, Ethiopia has been one of the major recipients of Israel's development aid and military assistance programs in sub-Saharan Africa. Even when bilateral relations were severed at the time of the Yom Kippur War, the Israeli government continued to supply military assistance to Ethiopia in its fight against the Eritrean Liberation Front.²⁷ Following the downfall of the Derg military junta in 1991, Israeli-Ethiopian relations began to prosper again, and the two countries worked toward re-establishing strong ties. Under the leadership of Netanyahu, the Israeli-Ethiopian rapprochement gained significant momentum, particularly after his first visit to Addis Ababa in 2016. By 2020, the annual trade volume between Israel and Ethiopia reached \$300 million, and Israel became one of the major investors in the agricultural sector in Ethiopia, drawing the attention of many foreign investors in the last decade.²⁸ Moreover, given the security threat posed by al-Shabab to Israel's interests in the Horn of Africa, the Israeli leadership boosted military assistance to Ethiopia, and the two countries have built strong security ties, particularly in the field of counter-terrorism cooperation.

Vaccine Donation

Israel's COVID-19-related aid to sub-Saharan Africa is not limited to the donation of PPE. Although the number of COVID-19 vaccine doses administered worldwide has reached over 10.5 billion, there is extreme global inequality in terms of access to the vaccines, as some high-income countries in North America and Western Europe pre-purchased enough doses to immunize their populations multiple times over. In the absence of a global structure to ensure equitable access to vaccines, many low-income countries are expected to wait until 2024 to receive enough doses to achieve mass COVID-19 immunization.²⁹ Given the scarcity of COVID-19 vaccines for low-income nations, many vaccine-producing countries use vaccine donations as instruments to achieve diplomatic leverage. Although Israel is yet to be a COVID-19 vaccine producer, the former Netanyahu Administration embarked on a campaign of vaccine diplomacy by tapping into Israel's stockpile of 100,000 surpluses of Moderna vaccines. According to the plan, Israel's excess supply of vaccines would be divided among the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) peacekeeping force stationed in the Sinai Peninsula and approximately 20 countries, which either have strong relations with Israel or are of particular importance to Israeli foreign policy goals.³⁰

Although the list of countries was not officially declared, Israel's Kan broadcaster reported that Equatorial Guinea, Uganda, Chad, Kenya, and Ethiopia were among the countries that would receive Israel's COVID-19 vaccine aid. Moreover, Netanyahu reportedly planned to send thousands of doses to some

Muslim countries in sub-Saharan Africa that have no diplomatic relations with Israel as a gesture of goodwill and possibly to hasten the normalization of diplomatic relations. According to the Israeli media, Mauritania, which is reportedly close to re-establishing diplomatic ties with Israel,³¹ would be one of the beneficiaries of the vaccine aid.³² Similarly, *The Times* newspaper reported that, in addition to Mauritania, two more undisclosed Muslim nations in contact with Israel to restore diplomatic relations would receive the vaccine aid.³³ It is possible that these two Muslim nations were Mali and Niger, as a map presented in Netanyahu's meeting with U.S.-Jewish leaders in 2019 placed Mali and Niger among countries that have "potential relations" with Israel.³⁴ However, in late February 2021, the Israeli Ministry of Justice halted the vaccine diplomacy initiative due to legal scrutiny over Netanyahu's authority to send surplus COVID-19 vaccines abroad without consulting with the cabinet. Netanyahu's go-it-alone approach to vaccine donations was previously criticized by some members of his former cabinet, including former Defense Minister Benny Gantz, who condemned vaccine shipments going abroad while Israeli citizens had not been fully vaccinated. Nonetheless, some countries were able to receive the vaccine before the scheme was halted.³⁵ For instance, in February 2021, Rwanda reportedly received 2,000 doses of Moderna vaccines from Israel.³⁶ Although the number of vaccines was symbolic, the donation highlights the importance of Rwanda for Israel's foreign policy aims in the region.

Since the resumption of diplomatic ties in 1994, severed following the Yom Kippur War, the two countries have gradually developed a strong partnership, and Rwanda has become one of Israel's key allies in the region. Even though bilateral trade figures are quite low, around \$5.5 million annually, economic and technical partnerships with Israel are of strategic importance to Rwanda, which tries to position itself as the start-up hub of Africa.³⁷ The Israeli-Rwandan cooperation is particularly strong in agricultural technology. Every year, over a hundred Rwandan university graduates attend an 11-month internship program in Israel to receive training in numerous subjects related to agricultural technology, ranging from irrigation techniques to soil conservation. Furthermore, in 2019, MASHAV's biggest sponsored project in Africa, the Rwanda-Israel Horticulture Center of Excellence, was inaugurated in Kigali to serve as a training center for modern horticulture production.³⁸ In addition to agricultural technology, Israel extends significant technical assistance to Rwanda in a broad range of subjects,

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among eight sub-Saharan African countries that abstained from voting on UNGA Resolution ES-10/L.22, which declared the status of Jerusalem as Israel's capital as "null and void." According to data provided by UN Watch, a non-profit organization monitoring voting patterns on Israel, between 2015-2020, Rwanda abstained from voting on 47 anti-Israel resolutions, which corresponds to approximately 70 percent of anti-Israel resolutions at the UNGA.³⁹ Rwanda is also reportedly a key partner in Israel's struggle against irregular immigration. In late 2017, both Israeli and foreign media outlets indicated that Rwanda was in negotiations to take in thousands of illegal immigrants from Israel, and Louise Mushikiwabo, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Rwanda, stated that her country could receive up to 10,000 African asylum-seekers from Israel.⁴⁰ Even though Rwandan officials later formally denied the existence of such a deal, investigations and testimonies of asylum-seekers indicate that, under the "voluntary departure" scheme, thousands of African asylum-seekers have left for Rwanda since 2013.⁴¹ Moreover, Rwanda is allegedly considering moving its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In November 2020, following former Israeli Communications Minister Yoaz Hendel's meeting with Rwandan President Paul Kagame, Hendel's spokesperson stated that the relocation of the embassy was on the agenda of the Rwandan President.⁴²

including public healthcare, education, cybersecurity, and communication technologies, both through MASHAV and private companies.

In exchange for technical know-how, Rwanda largely abstains from voting on critical anti-Israel resolutions at the UNGA. For example, Rwanda was

Israeli Foreign Policy toward Central Europe

Given its rich Jewish heritage, Central Europe has been one of the most significant sources of Jewish migrants since the early 20th century. Between 1919 and 1948, almost 200,000 Central European Jews emigrated to Palestine, which played a decisive role in shifting the region's demographic balance in favor of the Jews.⁴³ According to the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, an additional 235,000 Central European Jews have made *aliyah* (ascent) since the foundation of the State of Israel.⁴⁴ Therefore, people of Central European origin make up a significant portion of the Israeli population. Moreover, the region is an important destination for Israel's exports of both civilian and military goods. According to the 2019 data, the trade volume between Israel and Central European countries stands close to \$4 billion per year.⁴⁵



Israeli PM Netanyahu (L) meets PM of Czech Republic Babiš (R) and Hungarian PM Orbán (C) in Jerusalem on March 11, 2021.
HAIM ZACH / GPO / AA

Considering governments in Central Europe as potential defenders of Israel's interests at the UN and EU, the Israeli leadership frequently visited the region and hosted their counterparts in Israel over the last decade. In 2018, the Visegrad Group (V4), the Central European organization for cooperation between Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, planned to hold its first meeting outside of Europe in Israel, which was highly symbolic.⁴⁶ The summit was later canceled, due to Poland's withdrawal in the aftermath of the dispute over Poland's alleged collaboration with the Nazis during the Holocaust, but the remaining leaders from the V4 visited Israel and held meetings with their Israeli counterparts. In August 2021, tensions between Poland and Israel rose again when the Polish parliament adopted a law restricting Holocaust survivors from reclaiming lost property. The two countries withdrew their ambassadors amid the diplomatic controversy that followed. Calling the law immoral and anti-Semitic, Israel's Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said that his country "will not blink in front of the despicable behavior of the anti-democratic government in Poland."⁴⁷ Although Tal Ben-Ari Yaalon, the Israeli Ambassador to Warsaw, later returned to her post, as of February 2022, Poland has yet to send its top ambassador back to Israel.

Despite rising tensions in Israeli-Polish relations, Israel and the remaining V4 members enjoy significant cooperation. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary predominantly vote in favor of Israel at the UN and block anti-Israel statements and resolutions in the EU. The study of Kalhousová and Rubínová (2020) on the V4 countries' voting patterns on issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the UNGA outlines that, between 1993 and 2018, the

Czech Republic has voted closer to Israel than any other European country, except for Estonia and Latvia.⁴⁸ Although voting similarity with Israel was lower for Hungary and Slovakia, these two countries displayed a more pro-Israeli stance in the UNGA compared to the overwhelming majority of the EU members, including, inter-alia, Italy, Belgium, France, and Spain. Moreover, in 2015, the Czech Republic and Hungary were among the few EU member countries that harshly opposed the European Commission's decision to impose different labeling for products made in Israeli settlements, albeit at the risk of facing infringement proceedings from the Commission.⁴⁹ During his visit to Jerusalem the same year, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó called the Commission's decision "irrational" and argued that requiring special labels for Israeli products made beyond the pre-1967 lines "do not contribute to a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but causes damage."⁵⁰ In return, then-Prime Minister Netanyahu praised him for his "strong statement."

Israel's COVID-19 Diplomacy in Central Europe

Deployment of Israeli Medical Teams

The COVID-19 pandemic has exerted immense pressure on public healthcare systems around the world, as many countries failed to take appropriate measures to prevent the spread of the virus among their populations. The exponential rise in infection rates pushed hospitals that treat COVID-19 patients to the brink of collapse due to overcrowding of intensive care units (ICU) and the severe shortage of resources, particularly in terms of medical personnel. The workforce shortage has disproportionately affected high-income countries with aging populations, as older age correlates with the severity of the COVID-19. Among high-income countries, the shortage of medical staff has been particularly acute in Central Europe, where austerity measures and the mass exodus of medical workers abroad had already weakened public healthcare systems. Amid the high infection and ICU occupancy rates, medical students and retired/inactive medical personnel were enlisted to support exhausted frontline healthcare workers. Nevertheless, by late 2020, the shortage of doctors and nurses remained largely unsolved as a second wave of the pandemic swept through the region.

Although the Czech Republic was able to avoid widespread infection during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, by November 2020, the country had one of the highest COVID-19-related hospitalization rates in the EU. Following a request from the Czech government, in November 2020, a delegation of Israeli medical experts and paramedics was dispatched to the country. Stressing Israel's willingness to engage with the international community amid the turbulent times of the pandemic, then-Minister of Health Yuli Edelstein

said, “the State of Israel has much to offer to other countries in the world with regard to the COVID-19 and the emergency situation ... and will do so in the Czech Republic and elsewhere, as much as will be necessary.”⁵¹

The Czech Republic is among Israel’s closest allies in the EU, so much so that, in 2018, Netanyahu claimed that Israel had “no greater friend in the Eastern Hemisphere than the Czech Republic.”⁵² Since the downfall of the communist regime, the two countries have developed strong economic, military, and political cooperation. Due to the almost constant growth in bilateral trade since the early 1990s, Israel has become one of the largest export markets of the Czech Republic outside the EU, and the Czechs are among the major buyers of Israeli military goods in the EU. For instance, in 2019 and 2021, the Czech government bought Israeli radar systems and air-to-surface missile batteries worth nearly \$600 million.⁵³ Furthermore, the Czech Republic has been one of the staunchest supporters of Israel in intergovernmental organizations, as it has supported Israel’s position in almost every critical vote. For instance, the Czech Republic was the only EU member that voted against UNGA Resolution 67/19 of 2012 on Palestine’s status at the UN. Similarly, in 2020, the Czech Republic was among six countries that blocked an EU resolution, which would have condemned the Trump Administration’s “Deal of the Century” peace plan and the Israeli government’s intentions to annex some parts of the West Bank.⁵⁴ Furthermore, on March 11, 2021, the Czech Republic inaugurated a fully-fledged embassy office in Jerusalem and became the second EU member state to open a diplomatic mission in the city, after Hungary. The Czech leadership handed a major political victory to Netanyahu by formally recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and strengthening their country’s diplomatic presence in the city.

Even though Slovakia publicly reiterates its commitment to the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is reportedly among the CEE countries considering moving their embassies from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem

Vaccine Donation

In February 2021, after receiving 5,000 doses of Moderna vaccines for its frontline healthcare workers, the Czech Republic became the first European recipient of Israel’s vaccine aid.⁵⁵ Soon after, Slovakia became the second European beneficiary of Israel’s vaccine aid by receiving approximately 5,000 doses.⁵⁶ Like many other Central European countries, Slovakia has a close and dynamic relationship with Israel, extending back to its independence in 1993. Following the self-determined break up of Czechoslovakia, Israel was one of the first countries to recognize the newly established state of Slovakia. Since then, the two countries have developed extensive cooperation through numerous bilateral programs, particularly in education, culture, science, and indus-

Representing a continuation of Israel's ambitious diplomatic efforts and soft power campaign in recent years, sub-Saharan African and Central European countries were among the primary targets of the COVID-19 diplomacy initiative

trial research and development.⁵⁷ Despite its relatively small population of approximately 5.5 million, Slovakia is among the major trading partners of Israel in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), with an annual trade volume close to \$400 million. Moreover, Slovakia is one of the major buyers of Israeli defense systems in the CEE. For instance, in March 2021, the two countries concluded a landmark deal worth nearly €150 million for the delivery of 17 radar systems manufactured by Israel Aerospace Industries.⁵⁸ In recent years, as a result of growing cooperation between the two countries, Slo-

vakia became one of the most pro-Israeli nations in the EU. In addition to often voting against, or abstaining from voting on anti-Israel resolutions at the UNGA, the Slovak leadership generally blocks the EU's statements and actions critical of Israel.⁵⁹ Moreover, even though Slovakia publicly reiterates its commitment to the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is reportedly among the CEE countries considering moving their embassies from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.⁶⁰

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article focused on Israel's COVID-19 diplomacy efforts in sub-Saharan Africa and Central Europe, the two regions with which Israel has increasingly developed strong political, economic, and military ties in the last decades. Although the Israeli government later earned worldwide acclaim for its rapid vaccination campaign, Israel was one of the worst-affected countries by the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. So much so that, by September 2020, it had the highest daily COVID-19 infection rate per capita in the world. Nonetheless, from the early stages of the pandemic, the Israeli government has embarked on the so-called COVID-19 diplomacy to make use of the pandemic in the context of strengthening its existing diplomatic alliances and forging new partnerships. To this end, Israel has concentrated its COVID-19-related assistance, which included the provision of PPE, deployment of Israeli medical teams, and shipments of surplus vaccines, to certain countries that either had strong relations with Israel or held strategic importance for Israeli foreign policy. Representing a continuation of Israel's ambitious diplomatic efforts and soft power campaign in recent years, sub-Saharan African and Central European countries were among the primary targets of the COVID-19 diplomacy initiative.

Even though Israel's COVID-19-related assistance to sub-Saharan Africa and Central Europe was largely symbolic compared to other donors, in tandem with the intensified public diplomacy endeavors, the COVID-19 diplomacy initiative has enabled Israel to reinforce its international image and cement relations with friendly nations. However, the initiative came to a halt in 2022, as Netanyahu failed to form a government after the fourth election in two years. Although Netanyahu's opponents were later able to form a governing coalition, which eventually solved the prolonged political crisis in Israel, the new Bennett-Lapid coalition government faces difficult internal challenges, including complex security matters, and recurring waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the resumption of the humanitarian aid initiative is a low priority for the new government, and, so far, the Israeli leadership has not commented on the future of its COVID-19 diplomacy initiatives. In the absence of sustained efforts, whether Israel can preserve its gains remains questionable. ■

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